



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs  
Meeting Summary Minutes  
March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

**I. Call to Order & Introductions:** Bill Gray, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Commission on Veterans Affairs (CVA). Bill asked for all present to stand for a moment of silence for all of those who have given their lives and those who have been wounded for our country in the different conflicts in which our country has been engaged, and to remain standing for the Pledge of Allegiance.

**II. Approval of Minutes:** Bill Gray, Chair, made an edit to the February Commission Meeting Minutes to reflect that the tribute to Greg Hamilton, U.S. Navy, Vietnam Veteran, was held at the January Commission Meeting. Rich Fales, Commissioner, made a motion to accept the February Meeting Summary Minutes with the correction. Mike Subin, Commissioner, seconded the motion. A vote was taken and the February Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved with the correction. Approved minutes are available online at [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva).

**III. “Agent Orange and Its Effect On Those Who Have Been Exposed To It” ~ Tom Berger, Executive Director, Vietnam Veterans of America Veterans Health Council**

Dr. Tom Berger is a Life Member of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) and founding member of VVA Chapter 317 in Kansas City, Missouri. Dr. Berger served as a Navy Corpsman with the 3rd Marine Corps Division in Vietnam, 1966-68. Following his military service and upon the subsequent completion of his postdoctoral studies, he held faculty, research and administrative appointments at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, the State University System of Florida in Tallahassee, and the University of Missouri-Columbia, as well as program administrator positions with the Illinois Easter Seal Society and United Cerebral Palsy.

After serving as chair of VVA’s national PTSD and Substance Abuse Committee for almost a decade, he joined the staff of the VVA national office as Senior Policy Analyst for Veterans’ Benefits & Mental Health Issues in 2008. Then in June 2009, he was appointed as Executive Director of the VVA Veterans Health Council (VHC), a 501c3, whose primary mission is to improve the healthcare of America’s veterans through education and information.

The mission of the VHC speaks directly to the key challenges facing veteran outreach in this country today. At least 70% of veterans do not use the VA as their healthcare provider. VHC informs veterans and their families about healthcare issues related to their military service and provide information on how to file a claim with the VA. They also educate members of the healthcare community outside of the VA about health issues associated with military service and develop educational materials for medical and nursing schools, teaching hospitals and other related entities. VHC has [partnerships with approximately 50 organizations](#).

Agent Orange is a highly toxic herbicide used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War to defoliate hiding places used by the enemy and to clear the perimeters of military installations. The VA has recognized certain cancers and other health problems as presumptive diseases associated with exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service. There are approximately 49 diseases associated with Vietnam as well as several diseases that the VA recognizes in children of Vietnam

veterans. Diabetes and prostate cancer in particular are quite prevalent in Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange. Veterans who develop prostate cancer and were exposed to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service do not have to prove a connection between their prostate cancer and military service to be eligible to receive VA disability compensation. For children of Vietnam veterans, Spina Bifida is recognized as linked to their parents' exposure to herbicide. For the children of female veterans only, a wide variety of birth defects and childhood disabilities is recognized as service-related: [www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/conditions/birth\\_defects.asp](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/conditions/birth_defects.asp).

In 2008 the University of California released results of a research study showing that Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange have greatly increased risks of prostate cancers and even greater risks of getting the most aggressive form of the disease as compared to those who were not exposed. More than 13,000 Vietnam veterans enrolled in the VA Northern California Health Care System were stratified into two groups; exposed or not exposed to Agent Orange between 1962 and 1971. Based on medical evaluations conducted between 1998 and 2006, the study revealed that twice as many men exposed to Agent Orange were identified with prostate cancer. In addition, Agent Orange-exposed men were diagnosed two-and-a-half years younger and were nearly four times more likely to present with metastatic disease. Other prostate cancer risk factors - race, body-mass index and smoking - were not statistically different between the two groups.

In 2009 a study was conducted by five VA medical facilities located throughout the country. 1,495 veterans underwent removal of the cancerous prostate. 206 of the veterans who had been exposed to Agent Orange had a nearly 50% increased risk of their cancer recurring despite the fact that their cancer seemed relatively non-aggressive at the time of surgery. After surgery, their cancer came back with a PSA (Prostate-specific antigen) level that had doubled in 8 months versus only 18 months in non-exposed veterans. Veterans exposed to Agent Orange are at least twice as likely to develop prostate cancer, and have recurrence rates that are higher and more aggressive.

Gulf War Veterans may have been exposed to a wide variety of environmental hazards and potential harmful substances during their service in the Southwest Asia theater of military operations. These include chemical and biological warfare agents, oil well fires, smoke and petroleum, pesticides, vaccinations, burn pits, depleted uranium, and toxic embedded fragments. Studies indicate that Gulf War veterans exposed to these harmful substances have higher rates of ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis - i.e., Lou Gehrig's disease) and Multiple Sclerosis (MS) than other veterans.

A study is currently being conducted measuring the health outcomes of men and women veterans from the current wars - Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation New Dawn (OND). The study will be issued in 2014 and report on approximately seven years worth of data. Many veterans of OIF and OEF are using their VA health benefits for mental health, traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Handout: [The VVA Self-Help Guide To Service-Connected Disability Compensation For Exposure to Agent Orange](#)

Brochure: [Agent Orange Health Related Issues](#)

Paula Matuskey, Commissioner, said that many veterans do not use VA benefits because they have trouble navigating the system. In her role as Interim Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at Montgomery College she has attended training presentations by the VA about veterans educational benefits. Paula finds it difficult for not only veterans to navigate the system, but also trained staff

members. Lisa Stern, Commissioner, noted each military branch has an advocacy program for wounded, ill and injured service members.

A discussion ensued about the effects of multiple deployments on service members and the connection to the current high suicide rate. The number of suicides is highest in the National Guard. Many returning service members have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and other mental health issues. They cope with using drugs and alcohol when entering back into civilian life. The unemployment rate for National Guard members is over 50% in some states. John Mendez, Commissioner, commented that Bethesda Cares recently invited Dr. David Ted George, MD, Chief, Section of Clinical Assessment and Treatment Evaluation, LCTS, National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, National Institutes of Health, to talk about PTSD and how it relates to substance abuse issues. John offered to contact Dr. George about speaking to the Commission on this topic. Tom Berger offered to speak to the Commission on the topic of substance abuse disorders. He is the first representative of a national veterans' service organization to hold membership on the VA's Executive Committee of the Substance Use Disorder Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (SUD QUERI). Lisa will contact her friend at the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University about studies and reports relating to this issue. Jerry Godwin, Vice Chair, noted that a local company is currently researching whether PTSD can be detected in a person via blood test based on certain markers.

#### **IV. Chair and Vice Chair Report**

The [Drivers' Licenses and Identification Cards - Notation of Veteran Status](#) Senate Bill 276 introduced by Senator Mathias and co-filed House Bill 358 introduced by Delegate Conway passed on March 15th. This bill requires the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) to produce a document certifying veteran status; it also requires the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) to ensure that the driver's license or identification card of an applicant who presents the MDVA certification, a specified military service discharge form, or other acceptable documentation includes a notation that the applicant is a veteran. The bill will take effect January 1, 2013.

Betsy Luecking, Staff Liaison, was a guest speaker on the Kojo Nnamdi WAMU 88.5 radio talk show to discuss disability parking rules in our region. The District of Columbia is looking to install 1,500 red top parking meters that will reserve spots for use by people with disability tags or placards only. Betsy spoke about Montgomery County disability parking policies and the new Respect the Space campaign, an initiative that will raise awareness about the proper use of accessible parking spaces reserved for people with disabilities. Audio: <http://thekojoannamdishow.org/audio-player?nid=21046>. Transcript: <http://thekojoannamdishow.org/shows/2012-03-19/disability-parking-rules-our-region/transcript>

Prince Georges County Circuit Court is seeking someone to become a Veterans Mentor Coordinator. The person would train in Buffalo, New York at the Veterans Treatment Court from April 30<sup>th</sup> to May 4<sup>th</sup>. The training could lead to a paid position. Interested individuals must submit their names by Wednesday, March 21<sup>st</sup>.

Kris Kumaroo, Commissioner, spoke with the Director of the Office of Veteran and Disabled Affairs at University of Maryland University College (UMUC) regarding non-payment of tuition and benefits for several veterans for the current spring semester. UMUC is currently addressing the issue and Kris will keep the Commission apprised of updates.

Vietnam veteran [Robert M. Morgan](#) passed away on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and Vietnam veteran [Gregory V. Hamilton](#) passed away on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Both men died of Agent Orange complications.

## **V. Planning for 2012 Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Reunion Day (Wednesday, March 28<sup>th</sup>)**

Carl Bedell, Commissioner, will moderate the panel scheduled to speak at the event. Speakers will include three representatives from the Vietnam Veterans of America and one representative from the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center. Two of the speakers as well as Carl practice law relating to veterans and the other speakers have experience with Agent Orange. Several organizations will have information tables in the atrium, including The Army Historical Foundation, Mental Health Association, Veterans Benefits Administration, Vietnam Veterans of America, Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 641, and the National Museum of Health and Medicine. Kris Kumaroo, Commissioner, will invite his American Legion Post to provide information. County Executive Isiah Leggett will present a proclamation at 7:30 p.m. Light refreshments will be served and a slideshow featuring Vietnam War memorial photos from across the country will be shown during the reception.

Lisa announced that the Walter Reed Wounded Warrior Employment Manager position will be seeking applicants. She will e-mail job position information once she receives it. Lisa also reported that the Toolkit for Veteran Friendly Institutions ([www.vetfriendlytoolkit.org](http://www.vetfriendlytoolkit.org)) was launched today. Created by the American Council on Education (ACE), this online resource is designed to help institutions of higher education build effective programs for veteran students and share information. It highlights a variety of best practices including veterans-specific orientation offerings, on-campus veterans service centers, prospective student outreach efforts, faculty training, and counseling and psychological services for veteran students. It also includes video clips, profiles of student veterans programs across the U.S., and a searchable database of tolls and resources.

Karen McManus, Representative of the Office of Congressman Chris Van Hollen, announced Congressman Van Hollen will be hosting a Service Academy Forum on Wednesday, April 11<sup>th</sup> from 7:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. with representatives from the U.S. Air Force Academy, U.S. Coast Guard Academy, U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, U.S. Military Academy, and U.S. Naval Academy for classes entering July 2013. All interested 9th, 10th and 11th grade students and their parents are invited to attend to learn about the academies and their admission requirements. The forum will be held at Montgomery County Council Office Building Cafeteria, 100 Maryland Avenue, Rockville, MD 20850. For more information, please contact Representative Van Hollen's district office at 301-424-3501.

## **VI. New Business**

None.

## **VII. Announcements**

Paula will be retiring from Montgomery College and is submitting her resignation from the Commission on Veterans Affairs. A replacement from Montgomery College will be sought.

**Adjournment:** 7:30 p.m.

## **Next Full Commission Meeting:**

Tuesday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012, from 6:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at 401 Hungerford Drive, Rockville in the 1<sup>st</sup> Floor Tan Conference Room.

Respectfully submitted:

Carly Clem, OSC

Betsy Luecking, Staff Liaison